

What is Claimed is:

1. A method of exchanging first points held by a customer for second points, the first points that are issued by a first point issuer differing from the second points that are issued by a second point issuer, said point exchange method comprising the steps of:

(a) permitting the customer to set a first number of first points to be exchanged;

(b) permitting the first and second point issuers to set the point withdrawal and deposit rates of their first and second points respectively;

(c) determining an equivalent number of the second points based upon the point withdrawal and deposit rates of the first and second point issuers respectively, and the first number of the first points; and

(d) exchanging the first number of first points for a second equivalent number of second points.

2. The method of point exchanging as claimed in claim 1, wherein said step c) of determining an equivalent number of the second points comprises the substeps of:

(i) determining the monetary value of the first number of first points as the product of the first number of first points and the point withdrawal rate of the first point sponsor; and

(ii) determining the equivalent number of the second points as the quotient of the monetary value of the first number of first points divided by the point depositing rate of the second point sponsor.

3. A system for exchanging first points held by a customer for second points, the first points issued by a first point issuer differing from the second points that are issued by a second point issuer, said point exchange system comprising:

(a) a first terminal having a first terminal database for storing an account of the customer's first points;

(b) a second terminal having a second central database memory for storing an account of the customer's second points; and

(c) a transaction center having a center input and a central computer programmed to:

(i) permit the customer to set via said center input a first number of first points to be exchanged;

(ii) permitting the first and second point issuers to set the point withdrawal and deposit rates of their first and second points respectively;

(iii) determining an equivalent number of the second points based upon the point withdrawal and deposit rates of the first and second point issuers respectively, and the first number of the first points; and

(iv) providing respectively to said first and second terminals a first transaction message to withdraw the first number of first points from said first terminal database and to deposit the equivalent number of second points in said second terminal database.

4. The program managing system as claimed in claim 3, wherein said transaction center further responds to a customer's order to convert the first number of first points into an equivalent second number of second points and to deposit the second number of second points in said second database of said second terminal.

5. A method of permissioning a customer to enroll in a selected one or more of a plurality of point programs, each point program being controlled by its point issuer, said permissioning method comprising the steps of:

(a) facilitating the customer to select at least one point program of the plurality in which to be enrolled, and to enter predetermined information about the customer;

(b) permitting at least one point issuer to set its own criteria for customer enrollment; and

(c) comparing the customer's information with the enrollment criteria and, if there is a match, permissioning the customer to enroll in the selected one point program.

6. A method of facilitating a customer to enroll in selected ones of a plurality of point programs and to keep track of the number of points held by the customer in each point program with which the customer is enrolled, said enrolling and tracking method comprising the steps of:

- (a) maintaining a customer's file with a list of the IDs of the point programs in which the customer has enrolled;
- (b) facilitating the customer to enroll in a new point program; and
- (c) upon enrolling in a new point program:
 - (i) adding the ID of the new point program to the customer's file;
 - (ii) creating a new point program file for the customers to retain its balance of points in the new point program; and
 - (iii) adding from the point program file to the customer's file the point balance of the new point program.

7. The enrolling and tracking method of claim 6, wherein there is further included the steps of detecting a change of the customer's point balance in the point program file, and upon a point balance change, updating the point balance maintained in the customer's file with the changed point balance of the point program file.

8. A system for enabling a customer to enroll in selected ones of a plurality of point programs and keep track of the points issued to the customer by each of a plurality of the loyalty programs in which the customer has enrolled, said system comprising:

- (a) a plurality of terminals, each being related to a corresponding one of the plurality of point programs, being connected by a data transmission path to a transaction center and comprising a terminal server and a terminal database, each terminal database has a file for each of the plurality of present customers of the

terminals' point program for storing corresponding point balances, and each terminal server is programmed to respond to a new customer file message to create a new points file for a new customer in said terminal database; and

(b) said transaction center including a center input, a center database and a transaction server programmed to:

(i) maintain in said center database a customer's file with a list of the IDs of the point programs in which the customer has enrolled;

(ii) facilitate a customer to enroll in a new point loyalty program; and

(iii) upon enrolling in the new point program, adding the ID of the new point program to the customer's file in said center database, adding to the customer's file in said center database the point balance of the new point program, and generating and transmitting the create a new customer file message to said terminal associated with the points program in which the customer has enrolled.

9. The points tracking system as claimed in claim 8, wherein there is further included a device communicating with each of said plurality of terminal databases and said center database for sampling the point balances for the customer stored in said terminal database of a selected number loyalty programs and updating with the sampled balance the customer's point balances of the selected loyalty programs stored in said center database file.

10. In a system for enabling a customer to enroll and keep track of its points issued by selected ones of a plurality of point programs in which the customer has enrolled, each point program being managed by a corresponding terminal, each terminal including a terminal database and a terminal server which is programmed to accumulate the balances of points for customers to which points are issued by the terminal's point program, a transaction center comprising:

(a) a center input;

(b) a center database; and

(c) a center server programmed to:

(i) enable the customer to apply via said center input information about the customer;

(ii) to enroll the customer in selected ones of the point programs of the plurality; and

(iii) create a record for each enrolled customer to be stored in the center database, the customer's record comprising a first file for the information inputted by the customer, and a second file for storing the balances of the points accumulated by the customer from corresponding ones of the selected loyalty programs.

11. A system for reconciling the cost of transferring points between at least two of a plurality of point programs, said reconciling system comprising:

(a) a transaction center;

(b) a plurality of terminals, each associated with a corresponding one of the plurality of point programs and comprising a terminal database and a terminal server programmed to:

(i) deposit points in its terminal database;

(ii) keep track and store in its terminal database a record of the deposited points;

(iii) periodically summing the deposited points; and

(iv) transmit messages to said transaction center indicative of the number of deposited points in this terminal's loyalty program.

12. The reconciling system as claimed in claim 11, wherein said terminal server is programmed to calculate the value of the deposited points in terms of monetary units.

13. A method of exchanging first points that are issued by a first point issuer for second, different points that are issued by a second point issuer at exchange rates set by the first and second point issuers respectively, said points exchanging method comprising the steps of:

(a) facilitating the entry of first and second exchange rates by the first and second point issuers respectively;

(b) facilitating the entry of a customer's order for exchanging first points for second points;

(c) determining the presence or absence of each of the first and second exchange rates; and

(d) blocking the exchange of points in the absence of either of the first or second exchange rates.

14. A system for facilitating the exchange of points from or to a selected one of a plurality of point programs at exchange rates set by the proprietor of the selected one point program, said system comprising:

(a) at least one terminal associated with the selected one point program and comprising a terminal input, a terminal database and a terminal server programmed to:

(i) respond to a customer command to withdraw from and/or deposit points into said terminal,

(ii) facilitate the entry by the point program proprietor and storage in said terminal database of exchange rates for the points of the selected one loyalty program; and

(iii) detect the absence of the exchange rates for the selected one point program to transmit a blocking signal; and

(b) a transaction center coupled by a data transmission path to said one terminal and comprising a center input and a center server programmed to:

(i) respond to customer input on said center input for transmitting via the data transmission path to said one terminal the command whereby points are withdrawn and/or deposited into the point program associated with said one terminal; and

(ii) respond to the blocking signal to prevent the transmission of the command.

15. A method of enabling first and second point issuers that respectively issue first and second points to validate an exchange of the first points held by a customer for the second points, said point issuer validating method comprising the steps of:

(a) facilitating the first and second point issuers to enter their first and second criteria respectively;

(b) facilitating the entry of a customer's order to exchange its first points for the second points;

(c) generating a first transaction to withdraw the first points from the first point issuer;

(d) comparing the first transaction message with the first criteria;

(e) if the first transaction message satisfies the first criteria, generate a second transaction message to deposit the second points in the second point issuer;

(f) comparing the second transaction message with the second criteria; and

(g) if the second transaction message satisfies the second criteria, validate the exchange of the first points for the second points.

16. A system to enable a plurality of potential customers to be validated for communication with selected ones of a plurality of loyalty programs, each having a criteria for validating the potential customer for communication therewith, said customer validation system comprising:

(a) a plurality of terminals, each comprising a terminal data base and a terminal server; and

(b) a transaction center including a center input, a center database and a center server, said transaction center being connected to each of said plurality of said terminals by a data transmission path, said center database storing the validating

criteria for each of the plurality of loyalty programs, said center computer being programmed to:

- (i) facilitate the input of a request from a potential customer to communicate with at least a selected one of the plurality of loyalty programs;
- (ii) respond to the customer's request by constructing a customer's validation record in accordance with the criteria of the selected one loyalty program; and
- (iii) transmit the customer's validation record to said terminal associated with the selected one loyalty program;

(c) each of said terminal servers being programmed to:

- (i) receive and to compare the customer's validation record with the criteria of its selected one loyalty program; and
- (ii) if there is a satisfactory match, validate this customer for communication with the selected one loyalty program.

17. The customer validation system as claimed in claim 16, wherein each of said terminal servers is programmed to add a confirmation code to the validation record if the customer is validated for communication with the selected one loyalty program and to transmit the satisfied validation record to said transaction center.

18. The customer validation system as claimed in claim 17, wherein each of said terminal servers is further programmed to:

- (a) accumulate and store in its database a current balance of the points issued and/or redeemed by the terminal's loyalty program, and
- (b) to insert the current point balance in the satisfied validation record being transmitted to said transaction center.

19. A system for validating a transaction including the withdrawal of first points from a first point program and the deposit of second points in a second loyalty program, said transaction validating system comprising:

(a) at least first and second terminals associated respectively with the first and second point programs, each of said first and second terminals including a terminal input, a terminal database and a terminal server; and

(b) a transaction center including a center input, a center database and a center server, said transaction center being connected to said first and second terminals respectively by first and second data transmission paths, said center database storing first and second criteria for validating transactions respectively with the first and second point programs, said center server being programmed to:

(i) transmit via said first data transmission path to said first terminal a first withdrawal transaction message instructing the withdrawal of first points from the first point program;

(c) said first terminal server being programmed to:

(i) receive and compare the first withdrawal transaction message with the first criteria, and

(ii) if the first withdrawal transaction message satisfies the first criteria, insert a first confirmed response code in and transmit a withdrawal confirmation record via said first data transmission path to said transaction center;

(d) said center server being further programmed to:

(i) respond to the receipt of the withdrawal confirmation record with the first confirmed response code to transmit a second deposit transaction message via said second data transmission path to said second terminal; and

(e) said second terminal server being programmed to:

(i) receive and compare the second deposit transaction message with the second criteria, and

(ii) if the second withdrawal satisfies the second criteria, insert a second confirmed response code in and transmit a deposit withdrawal confirmation record via said second data transmission path to said transaction center.

20. In a system for reconciling the debits and credits created by an exchange of points from a first point program associated with a first terminal to a second point program associated with a second terminal, at least first and second data transmission paths connected respectively to the first and second terminals, a transaction center comprising:

(a) a center database storing first and second accounts for the first and second point programs respectively, each of the first and second accounts including a first file for retaining at least a point withdrawal rate and a point deposit rate for the first and second points respectively;

(b) a center server programmed to:

(i) transmit via said first and second data transmission paths first and second transaction messages respectively to the first and second terminals to effect respectively a withdrawal of a first number of first points from the first point program and a deposit of a second number of second points in the second point program; and

(ii) calculate a deposit to the first point program as the product of the first number of points and the point withdrawal rate of the first point program, and a credit to the second loyalty program as the product of the second number of points and the point depositing rate of the second point program.